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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief description of high tech stress as exhibited by students and teachers in virtual classes called "asynchronous anxiety," as well as ways of dealing with the problem. The paper challenges readers to become involved in a dialogue during the discussion. Highlights include: students' distrust of e-mail messages and assignments; teachers' anxiety about student participation; characteristics of the student who does well in virtual class (ability to work independently, personal motivation to learn, knowledge of what he/she wants to achieve); characteristics of "asynchronous anxiety" for teachers and students; benefits of face-to-face meetings and technological support; and other developments. (AEF)

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Cyberstress: Asynchronous Anxiety or Worried in Cyberspace

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Cyberstress: Asynchronous Anxiety or Worried in Cyberspace.

By Mary Lou Crouch and Virginia Montecino
George Mason University
TCC-L Online Conference—April 1997

Abstract: this article is a brief description of high tech stress as exhibited by students and teachers in virtual classes with a challenge to readers to become involved in a dialogue during the online conference.

"Hello—Ms Crouch—this is Patty from your 302 class? Ah, did you get my e-mail—the one with my essay attached?"

"Help! Anyone there? My e-mail keeps bouncing back!"

"To: Members of English 302 Virtual Class:

Hi all—I'm still trying to get our distribution list set up—please, if you know anyone who signed up for this class—check with him/her to make sure he/she is receiving the messages. I think we are missing some people since I haven't heard from several members of class for a couple of weeks. Let me know if you are there!"

Lost in Cyberspace!

Although the above examples are fictitious, they reflect a real problem associated with teaching in cyberspace. Virginia Montecino, my colleague and partner in developing computer mediated/distance learning

versions of advanced composition, calls this new version of stress—asynchronous anxiety. We have become increasingly aware not only of student stress but of our own in teaching virtual classes. We are not trying to scare anyone away from experimenting with classes in cyberspace, but we do believe this is an important problem to describe, discuss, consider, and, perhaps, dissolve. In the near future, the problem may disappear as individuals simply become more accustomed to asynchronous communication. We are in transition—still learning how to establish virtual classes, how to manage e-mail and bulletin board communication efficiently, how to maintain computer configurations, modem connections, data transfers, etc. And, during this transition, we are discovering tension of sort we may not have faced in the past. Our purpose in this brief, asynchronous, electronic "paper" is to say—here is a form of stress we have seen and felt in teaching virtual classes. We want to open discussion among those of you who have experienced similar responses to cyberspace so this "paper" is taking a slightly different form than you might expect in a scholarly conference. We are going to describe the asynchronous anxiety we have recognized both in our students and in ourselves and we will briefly mention some of the ways we have started dealing with the problem; but the main thrust of this paper will be the dialogue among the attendees of this conference. We are posing questions more than we are trying to give answers—perhaps together we can create answers.

We have noticed that our students and we, as well, have been experiencing a tension, a stress reaction, an anxious feeling while participating in virtual classes. Virginia coined the term "asynchronous anxiety" to describe this phenomena and we have been trying to examine the problem and find solutions for it. Basically, we discovered students in our first virtual classes did not trust the technology; they would e-mail us to see if we had received e-mail from them! Or they would even try phoning to check on whether we had seen their e-mailed assignments. Their concern seems to relate to the nebulous nature of cyberclass; it is difficult to grasp the existence of work sent out through the electronic media. As the instructors for virtual classes, we found ourselves wondering when students would contact us; we worried if we did not hear from them on a regular basis. Making the transition from a physically based class to a virtual class meant we no longer had the reassurance of physical/bodily presence to recognize who was participating or not. Logically, physical presence does not automatically indicate true classroom participation but at least then we have body language cues to rely on for information about the students work habits and responses. And they also can check out our responses to their work

Virginia and I both have had students who disappeared into cyberspace; we do not know if the asynchronous anxiety effect is responsible or not—this is an area we are examining because we are postulating that a major reason for disappearance has to do with a student's feeling of not being connected. This can be related to actual technical expertise, to equipment failure, or to a student's recognition that this type of class is simply not appropriate for him/her. We discovered the student who does best in virtual class is generally used to working independently, has personal motivation to learn, knows what he/she wants to achieve -in short, an adult student who pursue learn regardless of circumstances. Unfortunately, not all college students match this description; most fall far short especially in first year composition classes. For the more typical students, learning in cyberspace can be a difficult task.

Although many people tend to believe younger students, 18-24 years old, are thoroughly adept at video games and computer usage, the actual competency in using computers, exploring the internet, communicating via e-mail is generally almost non-existent. Yes, there are many whizkids who can zap aliens in an eye blink but zapping aliens with a joystick is far removed from effective discussion of someone's critical essay in an online environment. For these students, entering the virtual classroom may be even more disastrous and scary than for the non-computing students. The whizkids tend to believe they already know how to use the computers; the non-computing students recognize their own ignorance. We end up with various forms of stress which interrupt the learning process of individual students and hamper the effectiveness of collaborative projects.

What are the symptoms? Virginia and I have discussed our own anxious feelings when teaching virtual classes; even though we request and expect students to send e-mail messages or to participate in online forums at least once a week, students seldom do meet the once a week request. We begin scanning messages to make sure we didn't miss anyone; we tend to send out extra messages to the whole class asking for responses, asking if anyone needs help, and testing to see if anyone is really "out there." Another version of asynchronous anxiety is a feeling of dread when facing our computers—we find ourselves almost

avoiding logging on perhaps because we will discover students missing in cyberspace?

Students have mentioned similar feelings of dread; they fear they won't be able to "get the computer to work" or "figure out what to do next." Sometimes students with the least computer experience have reported a situation of "freezing" in front of the screen; something similar in effect to the dread of the blank page only complicated by the high tech aspects of dialing in, logging on, and then needing to write, to think, to respond. In writing classes especially, we are seeing not just the fear of what to write, how to write, when to write, but also how to use the computer for writing online (or offline to place online later). Another aspect is the absolute terror presented to students by the vastness of the internet; those of you who already use the internet for research recognize this feeling of being overwhelmed by the immensity of information available and of trying to discover how to use the information.

What can we do? Virginia and I both advocate use of face to face meetings when possible especially for new users of computers; even though students taking our classes are supposed to be proficient in the use of e-mail and file transfers, and have regular access to an internet accessible computer, we still discover wide gaps in the students' true abilities when faced with the challenge of an online course. We find some handholding necessary in helping students overcome their anxieties in cyberspace. And as we see the students become more proficient, we also ease some of our anxieties. We must remember that use of the computer mediated class can replace the traditional class but for some students and for some teachers a blend of the old (face to face) and the new (virtual) will make the transitions easier.

When we start a new semester, we try to have at least 4-6 hours of real meetings with our students to introduce them to the computers available on campus for their use, to demonstrate the software we are using, to make sure everyone has a functioning e-mail account, and to discuss the assignments for the course including how to reach us especially if the servers crash making computer connections impossible. We set up backup procedures for every occasion we can imagine and those we have already struggled through—such as, having

short printouts of syllabi to reflect the larger online syllabi and transparencies of web pages to use on overheads if we can't connect; requesting hard copies of important assignments for grading rather than just online versions; arranging for meetings on specific days JUST IN CASE!

We are considering other ways to ease the transitions for online classes including special computer sessions as pre-requisites to online courses. At George Mason University, we already have a variety of free classes for students to take voluntarily to improve their computer skills but currently none are required as pre-requisites to the online classes. Since many of the first online classes were in the computer sciences and information technology departments, this really was not a problem. Now that we are offering online general education classes such as first year composition and advanced composition courses as distance learning classes, we need to consider the level of technological expertise students and teachers have when they work in cyberspace.

We have talked enough—enough for you to be comparing our experiences with your own. What experiences have you had with asynchronous anxiety? What have you seen happening with your students as you moved outward into virtual classrooms? How have you dealt with this stress? What can you see as helping smooth the transition for others attempting to teach virtual classes? Your responses create the research material for this topic—send in your comments. Let's start the conversation.

Links to our virtual class materials:
http://mason.gmu.edu/~mcrouch
http://mason.gmu.edu/~montecin